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ABSTRACT

This report provides guidelines and a process for people with disabilities living in Massachusetts to follow to evaluate employment service options that will allow them to receive services best meeting their individual needs. Strategies for finding out information about the different programs and a checklist are given by which to evaluate different components of an employment service, including agency structure, placement, staff, and services. Components of a quality program are provided, including: (1) the belief that everyone has a right to work; (2) the individual receiving services helps to decide what services are to be provided; (3) services are provided in integrated community settings; (4) assessment is not done to help the person figure out their capabilities; (5) people are helped to find their own jobs rather than fit into existing programs; (6) the program makes every effort help people use services and resources used by all community members; (7) emphasis is placed on matching the person with a situation which meets individual needs and/or lessens the possibility of behavior challenges; (8) as much as possible, training is done by the employer; and (9) training and support are customized to the special needs of the individual. The report concludes with a list of Massachusetts and national resources. (CR)

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The Institute Brief

Institute for Community Inclusion
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Why You Should Critically Evaluate Service Options

Investigating and critically assessing services takes time and energy. Is it worth the bother? The answer is definitely **Yes!**

All Programs are Not Alike: While they are sometimes portrayed as being fairly similar, all employment programs for people with disabilities are not alike. Programs vary in size, types and variety of services offered, service and staff quality, people served, and most importantly, quality of results.

You Do Have a Choice: People with disabilities have much more say in the services they receive then they may realize. Sometimes funding agencies present services available with a "take it or leave it" attitude or from the point of view of an "expert" who knows what's best. There are other times that funding agencies are simply unaware of the variety of options available. People with disabilities need to advocate for service alternatives, which means knowing what alternatives are available.

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Quality Employment Services: Will You Know It When You See It?

When purchasing most products or services, we typically weigh a variety of factors before making a decision to hand over our hard-earned dollars. Even the most routine purchases, such as a newspaper or candy bar, are done with some thought about the quality and reputation of the product. When spending a lot of money for something which will have a major impact on our lives, a significant amount of research is often done before making the actual purchase decision. For many types of products and services, there are lots of places to get information in order to make a good purchasing decision. Yet, when it comes to the quality of employment services for people with disabilities, the consumers of these services have little to guide them. Frequently, they have to rely on professionals to provide them with information on the variety and quality of services available. Hopefully this information is comprehensive and objective, but these professionals often have a vested interest in the selection of a specific service option and a limited knowledge of a person's unique needs.

Even though it is often not the consumer's own money being used to purchase services, it is their own life. People with disabilities and their families need to look at the selection of employment and vocational service options as they would any other major purchasing decision, since these decisions can have an impact on the person's life for many years to come. The intent of this article is to provide guidelines and a process for people with disabilities to evaluate service options, in order to receive services that best meet individual their needs.

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Are There Alternatives?
While evaluating programs and service options may sound like a good idea, the reality all too often has been a limited number of possibilities for services. Programs may not have the capacity to take additional referrals; there may simply be a limited number of service providers, particularly in rural areas; or, while there might be some alternatives, there may still be a lack of quality services to properly meet an individual's needs. There is still a need to evaluate what's available, to see if it's necessary to advocate for making changes to existing services or to develop creative alternatives.

Empowerment Through Knowledge:
Taking the time to learn about and critically assess service options allows you to be much more in the "driver's seat" when negotiating with funding agencies and service providers, rather than passively accepting what you're being told.

Start by Figuring Out What You Want and Need

Before gathering information on services, you need to figure out what's important to you. Think about what jobs you have had in the past and what services you received. What worked? What didn't work? What did you like? What didn't you like? Some areas to think about:

- ❒ Do you need help in finding out what kind of job and career you would like and what you are good at?
- ❒ What kinds of help do you need now? In the future? Will your support needs change over time? Are there times you need more help than others?
- ❒ How active can you personally be in the job search? Do you just need some help in finding a job, or someone to take the main role in the job search including setting up and going with you on interviews?
- ❒ What are your hopes for employment? Type of job? Number of hours? Pay? Benefits?
- ❒ What is most important to you? Pay and benefits? Fun people to work with? Safety and security? Location? Job satisfaction? Potential for promotions and growth?
- ❒ What type of services do you want and need on the job? Will you need help from a job coach? If so, do you need help only when you start the job, or will you sometimes need help even after you've been on the job for awhile?
- ❒ How often will you need help on the job? Every day? Weekly? Less frequently?
- ❒ Do you need help with transportation?
- ❒ Do you need help finding things to do when you're not working?
- ❒ How are services going to be paid for? Some of the funding options: your state developmental disability agency, or mental health agency; funding from social security (through the PASS, IRWE, or alternative provider programs); private funds of your own

Getting the Information

One of the challenges you will face is how to get the information you need, in order to make a good decision about which services are best for you. You can use the same strategies you would use when making any other major "purchase" or looking for professional services. For example, when looking for a doctor, people will usually ask their friends for ideas and recommendations. You can similarly talk to "customers" who have had experience using employment services. Here are some ideas on how to get information:

- ❒ Talk to friends.
- ❒ Talk to other people who have used similar services.
- ❒ Talk to other families.
- ❒ Talk to teachers.
- ❒ Ask state funding agencies, such as the Department of Mental Retardation, or Vocational Rehabilitation office for a list of provider agencies in your local area.
- ❒ Find out if state agencies have information and statistics on how successful individual agencies have been in helping people find and keep jobs.
- ❒ Interview the directors and staff of provider agencies. Ask for consumer and family references.
- ❒ Read agency's annual reports and other written material from the provider.
- ❒ Contact your local chapter of the Association for Persons in Supported Employment (APSE).
- ❒ Contact local self-advocacy and family advocacy groups (for example, Citizen Advisory Board, Families Organizing for Change).
- ❒ Talk to your service coordinator at the funding agency.

In gathering information, it's important to keep the following in mind:

Get a variety of viewpoints. For example, a funding agency may consider an agency to be a good provider because they do their paperwork well. However, this may not mean the agency provides the quality employment services you are looking for, and may not be the best advocates for the people they serve.

Remember what is important to others may not be important to you, and vice versa. For example, you may not want or need a lot of help from agency staff on the job, while other people may feel that regularly having a staff person present on the job is critical to their success. Another example is that some families simply value having some place safe for their family member to go every day, such as a sheltered workshop, while others want a good job in the community.

All too often, the expectations for people with disabilities or the services available have not been very high. Services which are regarded as good by many people, may not be good enough for you.

Remember that numbers don't tell the whole story. Look at both objective job placement data (number of jobs, hours, benefits) as well as the quality of jobs, and the quality of relationships that staff have with program participants and families.

What to Ask

In gaining a comprehensive "picture" of an organization and judging whether it's the right one for you, the following questions may be helpful.

Agency Structure

- ❑ Is the program based in the community (an office) or is it run out of a facility (like a sheltered workshop)? If it is based in a facility, does a new program participant have to spend time in the facility before or during the job search?
- ❑ Does the agency offer a variety of services, or is the agency strictly focused on community employment for people with disabilities?
- ❑ What is the agency's guidelines for service eligibility? When it is unclear whether a person will easily succeed in employment, are they willing to give people a chance?
- ❑ Who does the agency serve? People with what kind of disability? What ages? What gender and races?
- ❑ Where does the agency receive funding from? If the agency is mainly government funded (as most are), what specific state agencies provide funding? Is there more than one funding source? How stable is that funding?
- ❑ How many people does the agency serve? (Note: Studies have shown that agencies which serve more than 100 individuals are generally not as successful in meeting the individual community employment needs of people with disabilities—*Institute for Community Inclusion, April 1994*)

New Service Trends

In the past 5 to 10 years, there have been many changes in expectations and what opportunities people consider "best practices" in services for people with disabilities. These changes in the disability field have created the need for new methods to evaluate services. These changes include:

Movement Toward Community Based Services: In the past, when most programs (such as sheltered workshops) were facility based, it was fairly easy to tour the facility, meet program participants and staff, and make a judgment about the quality of services being offered. The current movement towards helping people get jobs in the community instead of spending their days in a "facility", is exciting and a much welcomed trend. However, as individuals work in regular jobs, it is

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Placement

- ❑ How many people did the agency assist in finding jobs in the last year?
- ❑ What types of jobs has the agency helped people find?
- ❑ How long do individuals stay in the jobs they find with help of the agency?
- ❑ What do people earn? How many hours are they working? Do they get benefits (health insurance, vacation)?
- ❑ Does the agency offer individual placements? Are group placements (enclaves) used?
- ❑ What happens when a person does not succeed on a job? Is the agency willing to help them a second or third time to get a job?

Staff

- ❑ What kind of staff turnover does the agency have? How long has the director been there?
- ❑ How many staff are available to help people (i.e., direct service staff)?
- ❑ What kind of qualifications and credentials do staff have?

Services

- ❑ Ask agency staff to describe the typical process for providing services for an individual. How does the agency tailor services to individual needs? What opportunities are provided for the person to exercise real control and choice over the services provided?
- ❑ What kind of planning process is used to design services, job search and support? How are family, friends, residential providers and other significant individuals involved in this process?
- ❑ How does the agency help people figure out what kind of job they want (i.e., how do they do vocational assessment and evaluation)? Does the agency use community settings?

harder to get information and see the services offered, since there is not a stationary "facility". What is needed are creative ways to evaluate community-based services.

Changes in Funding Methods: In an effort to give people more control and choice over where the money spent on their behalf goes, the use of vouchers and other flexible financing mechanisms is increasing, at least on a trial basis. This desirable shift to greater individual control brings with it a need to properly evaluate services.

Community Employment as a Desired Outcome: With the expansion of school-to-work initiatives, a growing number of people with disabilities are leaving school prepared and expecting to work in the community. These new graduates need to be able to decide which services are best for them, to ensure they have the opportunity for the type of job, career, and life they want.

- ❒ What role does the agency take with employers and people with disabilities in job search efforts, placement, job accommodation and ongoing support? Do they view their role as one of providing assistance and support, or is it more of a "take charge" authoritative approach?
- ❒ How does the agency emphasize the use of existing natural supports?
- ❒ How does the agency assist and support individuals during periods of unemployment or underemployment?
- ❒ Does the staff talk about the individuals served in respectful and adult-appropriate ways?
- ❒ Does the agency create a welcoming environment? Are people greeted when they have an appointment? Does the agency have a welcome letter or packet for new clients?
- ❒ Can the agency provide recommendations from people who have previously received services from them?
- ❒ How does the agency fund and provide for the long-term support needs for the people they serve?
- ❒ Does the agency appear to be organized and professional?
- ❒ What is the reputation of the agency in the community?
- ❒ Does the agency have common bathroom and dining facilities for staff and clients
- ❒ Do you feel comfortable with the way you are treated? Are your questions answered in a way that respects and acknowledges your concerns and provides real answers?

Consumer and Family Perspectives

Recent qualitative research has pointed out the need for consumers and family members to critically evaluate service options. Among the implications of this research:

Professionals working with individuals with disabilities need to understand the importance of meaningful work in the lives of people with disabilities

- Work plays an integral role in developing self-esteem as well as a sense of being part of society
- Work needs to be consistent with the individual's goals and interest, not just compatible with available job openings

A need for a variety of individualized supports and opportunities on the job

- Use of natural supports of co-workers and supervisors on job site
- Flexible job coach support that responds to individual and family needs

Greater consumer and family involvement in the vocational rehabilitation system

- Education of consumers as to their rights and responsibilities in the VR system
- Empowerment of consumers to take control over their decisions
- As appropriate, active family involvement of family in rehabilitation system through support and information sharing

From Consumer and Family Perspectives on the Meaning of Work. By Ruth Freedman and Sheila Fesko; The Center for Promoting Employment: RRTC, a project of the Institute for Community Inclusion and Boston University Center on Work and Family

What is a Quality Program?

If you want a job in the community, here are some guidelines for deciding whether a program is the right one for you. No program is going to meet all these perfectly, but programs should recognize these as important things they should work toward.

Eligibility

Everyone has the right to work, without regard to label or severity of disability.

Individual Choice

The individual receiving services helps decide what services are provided, how they are provided, and which staff provide them.

Service Setting

Services are provided in integrated community settings (e.g., businesses in the community), with the chance to spend time, communicate and develop friendships with people without disabilities.

Assessment

Assessment (evaluation) is not done to figure out "what's wrong" and how to "fix it," or to see if the person is "ready" to work. The agency helps the person figure out their dreams, hopes, interests and capabilities. Jobs and support services are developed in response to what the person wants and needs. Community settings (i.e., real employers) are used for all assessments.

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Service and Placement Design

Rather than "fitting" people into existing programs, people are helped to find their own jobs (not group situations), and are paid directly by the employer at the competitive wage for the job. For example, a program may give options such as, "You can go in our janitorial training or food service training program" or "You can go to our enclave at the supermarket or the packaging company." What they should be saying is, "Let's find out what kind of job you would really be happy doing, and we'll help you find it."

Use of Community Resources

The program makes every effort to help people use services and resources used by all community members (people with and without disabilities). "Special" services for people with disabilities (such as special transportation) are used only when there are no other possibilities. For example, a person who wants to learn office skills would be provided help to take a course at the local community college, rather than receiving the training from a disability agency.

Behavior Challenges

A good provider realizes that people have a right to work in the community, even if they act differently or have behavior problems. Instead of controlling or modifying behavior before a person is given a chance at a job, emphasis is placed on matching the person in a situation which meets their needs and/or lessens the impact of the behavior. People are placed in jobs where their behavior is acceptable (e.g., an individual who speaks in a loud tone of voice is placed in an active, noisy work environment), in places which will not cause behavior problems (e.g., an individual with a compulsive eating disorder is placed in a job with no access to food), or simply in environ-

ments where they are given more control, thus reducing problem behavior over time.

Training and Staff Role

Training is done to the fullest extent possible by the employer. Agency staff see their role as providing consultation to supervisors, co-workers and other community members, to help the person with a disability succeed on the job. Staff do not replace typical employer training and support, but only add to it if necessary.

Training On The Job

Training and support are customized to the specific needs of the individual, the employer, and the social aspects of the job. Training and accommodations are always done in ways that are respectful of the individual, and encourage integration into the job environment. For example, co-workers interact and give feedback directly to the employee, and not through the job coach; the job coach does not speak for the employee.

Skill and Social Match

In developing jobs, the agency not only looks for a job which is a good match to the skills and interests of the individual, but also finds jobs which a person is comfortable in socially. For example, a person who is naturally quiet and likes to keep to themselves, would not be placed in a job which requires lots of personal interactions and where everyone else is outgoing.

Social Inclusion

Jobs are developed and services provided so that people not only get a job, but also get the chance to make friends and participate in social activities connected with the job. People are encouraged and provided assistance to participate in such activities as: going to lunch with co-workers, coffee club, birthday celebrations, social gatherings and parties outside of work, and company sports teams.

Career Development

Services are provided in a way that supports ongoing career development. Individuals have the opportunity to improve their skills, change positions and jobs, and change careers. Career development includes the opportunity for increased hours, benefits, and employment on a full-time basis with financial independence.

Holistic Approach

Having a good job is seen as one part of your life that relates to other things, including social relationships, recreation, and where you live. Services are provided so that a person is able to experience all aspects of community life.

The purpose of supported employment is not simply to help a person with a disability get a job. Supported employment is about people:

- **Reaching their full potential**
- **Becoming participating community members**
- **Having a valued role, with the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else**
- **Experiencing and enjoying all that life has to offer .**
- **Defining themselves and their place in the world**

A job is simply one of the ways for these things to happen.

Resources

State and Local Resources

Massachusetts Commission for the Blind
(617) 727-5550
(800) 392-6450
TTY: (800) 392-6556
Fax: (617) 727-5960
http://www.state.ma.us/mcb

Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
V/TTY: (617) 727-5106
V/TTY: (800) 882-1155
Fax: (617) 727-0890

Massachusetts Department of Mental Health
Voice: (617) 727-5500
TTY: (617) 727-9842
Fax: (617) 727-550, ext. 490

Massachusetts Department of Mental Retardation
(617) 727-5608
TTY: (617) 727-9866
Fax: (617) 727-9867

Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
V/TTY: (617) 727-2183
Voice: (800) 245-6543
Fax: (617) 727-1354
http://www.magnet.state.ma.us/mrc

Office of Employment Services
Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Voice; (617) 727-2586
FAX: (617) 727-1354
http://www.state.ma.us/mrc/oes
Has available a booklet listing providers of employment services in Massachusetts

Federation for Children with Special Needs
95 Berkeley Street, Suite 104
Boston, MA 02116
V/TTY: (617) 482-2915
Western Massachusetts - voice only:
(413) 562-3691
Toll Free V/TTY: (800) 331-0688
Fax: (617) 695-2939
http://www.fcsn.org

Information Center for Individuals with Disabilities
29 Stanhope Street
Boston, MA 02116
Voice: (617) 450-9888
Toll Free: (800) 462-5015

Massachusetts Associations for Persons in Supported Employment (MAPSE)
P.O. Box 1608
Boston, MA 02205-1608
http://www.seaside.org/mapse

New England INDEX
Shriver Center UAP
200 Trapelo Road
Waltham, MA 02154
Inside New England: (800) 642-0249
Outside New England: (617) 642-0248
TTY: (800) 764-0200
Fax: (617) 642-0122
http://fat-pig.shriver.org/
Central source for both local and national resources

Massachusetts Families Organizing for Change
P.O. Box 50
Raynham, MA 02768
Voice: (800) 406-3632

National Resources

Association for Persons in Supported Employment
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, VA 23220
Voice: (804) 278-9187
Fax: (804) 278-9377
http://www.apse.org

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)
PO Box 6123
Morgantown, WV 26506-6123
Voice/TTY: (800) 526-7234
http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/

President's Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities (PCEPD)
1111 20th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036-3470
Voice: (202) 376-6200
TTY: (202) 376-6205
http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/pcepd/

Self Advocates Becoming Empowered
P.O. Box 121211
Nashville, TN 37212-1211
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The mission of the **Institute for Community Inclusion (UAP)** is to work to create and preserve a quality life for people with disabilities and their families through training, research, information sharing, and service with and for individuals with disabilities and their family members, community members, service providers, and policy makers.
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